

WHAT HAPPENED TO AMERICAN SOCIALISM?

Appraising the Half-Century's Record

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THIS year's fiftieth anniversary of the Socialist Party of America will hardly be celebrated with high heart by the members of either the party or its "right-wing" offshoot, the Social Democratic Federation, not to speak of the thousands of unaffiliated who still think of themselves as somehow connected with the "movement." For it is simply a fact that half a century after its founding in Indianapolis, in July 1901, the Socialist party as a political entity is virtually nonexistent. A bare skeleton of an organization remains: a few "old-timers" and younger militants continue to work for the cause; statements from official Socialist quarters appear occasionally in the press; token candidates for office are sometimes put up—but aside from such anomalies as Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Reading, Pennsylvania, where Socialists actually get elected

ONE of the striking differences between the American and European political scenes is the absence in this country of any significant socialist party or party of labor. Yet this was not always so; in 1912 the Socialist party polled nearly a million votes out of a total of fifteen million, and many perceptive political observers were ready to predict its rapid rise to major influence and power. By now, Socialism is no longer a factor of any consequence; how and why did this happen? WILL HERBERG is director of educational and research activities for the dressmakers' organization of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. He is author of "The Political Theory of American Socialism," in the forthcoming two-volume work *Socialism and American Life*. During the past five or six years, his writings on religion have won him wide recognition in that field; his book *Judaism and Modern Man: An Interpretation of Jewish Religion* has just been published by Farrar, Straus and Young. Mr. Herberg has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY, most recently with an article in our December 1950 issue on the German Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig.

to office, there is little sign of life in a movement that a generation ago seemed destined to become an important and permanent part of the political scene, like its counterparts in Europe.

What has happened to bring American Socialism to this sad pass? Is reaction so rampant, has the nation swung so far to the right, that there is no longer any room for a vital Socialist challenge in this country? There are radicals in Europe, and some even in America, who are fond of picturing the American situation in terms of this familiar stereotype. Yet American reality so obviously belies them as to make nonsense of such simplifications. For at the very time that Socialism was disappearing from the American scene as an organized political force, the Socialist program was being translated into law and social practice to an extent far beyond the expectations of its early protagonists. Here, if a failure, is surely a successful failure; and the end of the movement's achievements is not yet. Paradoxically, as the Socialist party lies dying, its "idea" goes marching on.

How was it that the Socialist idea became dissociated from the organized Socialist movement to continue as a vital, though much transformed, force in American life? Why is it that Norman Thomas enjoys such wide respect as a spokesman of social liberalism and yet can get no more than a handful of votes when he runs for the presidency? What happened with Socialism in America that its fate should have turned out so very different from that of Socialism in democratic Europe?

FROM its very inception, American Socialism, as embodied in the Socialist party, was a strikingly different movement from its Continental prototype. To put it quite bluntly: American Socialism never was really a

workers' movement. At its best it was a reflection of the older middle-class radicalism that runs through so much of American politics. Other strains and tendencies merged into it from time to time, but in its days of greatest vitality and promise American Socialism was essentially Populism gone Marxist. And we should remind ourselves that Populism largely reflected the grievances of farmers and small business against the rising dominance of big business and finance: there was in it an evangelical, apocalyptic strain somewhat akin to the revolutionary appeal of Marxism. In any case, it is significant that in 1912, when the membership and vote of the Socialist party were at an all-time high, "the highest number in proportion to population"—Professor William B. Hesseltine points out—"were found in the Western states. . . . Rural Utah had relatively more Socialists than industrial Pennsylvania; Kansas, more than Ohio; Texas and Florida, more than New York. In Oklahoma, there were five non-Socialists to every Socialist; in New York, the figures were twenty-two to one."

There were indeed groups of workers who showed some affinity for the Socialist party. In New York and other large Eastern cities, the party included numbers of foreign-born workers, particularly Jewish, who were good trade unionists and Socialists of the more familiar Continental kind. Morris Hillquit, the longtime party leader, was representative of this element. Then there were the half-proletarianized laborers of the West—lumberjacks, agricultural workers, metal miners, casual and migratory laborers—less than a generation away from the frontier. These men were insurgents, violent, deeply resentful of the discipline of modern industrialism; primitive anarcho-syndicalism just about suited their temperament and ideas. They formed the bulk of the IWW and also a large part of the strength of the "left wing" in the Socialist party. "Big Bill" Haywood, who ended up as a Communist, was their natural spokesman, and Debs himself was in many ways associated with them.

These two worker groups—the immigrant

trade unionists and the indigenous semi-proletarians of the West—pulled in opposite directions, but on the whole it was the latter, reinforced by the dominant middle-class Populists-gone-Marxist, who set the tone and defined the attitude of the party. And that attitude was not such as to make an appeal to organized labor particularly promising. Debs was throughout his career hostile to the AFL: indeed, he took a leading part in the founding of the IWW as a "revolutionary" dual-union center. The best efforts of the Socialist trade unionists met with little more than local success; no real rapprochement between the Socialist party and organized labor ever took place in this country.

THIS leads us to a basic cause of the Socialist party's failure to attract the American worker. In Europe, especially on the Continent, modern Socialism made its first big impact upon the workers by its vigorous championship of democratic rights as well as economic reform. When Socialism first appeared on the scene in Europe, the workers were almost everywhere disfranchised, without political or civic rights. In Italy, universal manhood suffrage did not come until 1912; in Holland, not until 1917. In Germany, on the eve of the First World War, the three-class system of voting still prevailed in Prussia. Even in Britain, widespread suffrage was not granted until the last quarter of the 19th century. Under such circumstances, Socialism could convincingly come forward as the banner-bearer of democracy, the spokesman of the disfranchised masses, and the masses accepted it as such. The bond thus established served European Socialism in good stead; thereafter nothing could draw the most active sections of the working class away from the movement. In time, Continental Socialism reached out far beyond the working class, but the working class always remained its sure base. This hegemony, which Continental Socialism very early established over the working class, it owed to the *backwardness* of European conditions which enabled it to act, virtually

unchallenged, as the champion of the working people in their striving for a legitimate place in modern society.

Very different were the conditions which Socialism had to face in this country. Here, the democratic reforms Continental Socialism advocated had long been part of the established order, for the white population at least. However unsatisfactory their conditions, the American workers were not, and did not consider themselves to be, a disfranchised, unprivileged class. They had the ballot; they had their political rights; they had their recognized, legitimate place as "free and equal" American citizens. And even the immigrant industrial workers in the process of their "Americanization" very soon fell into the same pattern.

Socialism, as Professor Selig Perlman has shown, never understood American labor, never understood the actual American trade unionist. It saw everything through European eyes and judged everything by European standards. It therefore looked down upon the American workers as "backward" and "immature" because they refused to follow the Continental pattern and insisted on building their movement in their own way, according to their own lights. The Socialist was always waiting for the American workers to "develop," to "come of age"; but when, after 1935, it seemed as if they had at last really done so, and labor consciousness and militancy rose to flood tide, the Socialist party engineers were unable to harness this new dynamic to their political machine.

THE sum of it seems to be that the American Socialist was assiduous in learning everything about America except the one crucial fact, that America was not Europe. America was never a replica of Europe; and despite superficial and conjunctural appearances, American "capitalism" and Europe's have become less and less alike in the past half century. The chief distinguishing features relevant to our analysis, over and above such well-known elements as the historical role played by the frontier, class mobility, and immigration, are: (1) the immense resources

of American capitalism, and (2) the great elasticity of the American political system.

Operating on a vast continent with unrivaled natural assets at its command, American capitalism has shown a capacity for satisfying the needs of the people and for reforming itself that would have amazed its eulogists of two generations ago almost as much as its detractors. An economy that can effect an increase in individual real income of 350 per cent in the course of a century (1850-1949), with a simultaneous decrease of 45 per cent in the length of the work week—so that the average worker, who earned \$14 (in terms of a dollar of constant purchasing power) for a 66-hour week in 1850, now earns about \$62 for 36 hours—is hardly the kind of capitalist economy envisaged in Socialist theory. But it is emphatically the kind of economy in which "Gompersism," with its policy of "More, more, here and now," makes sense. This policy, incidentally, sounds more "materialistic" than it is, for along with higher wages and shorter hours, and a widening measure of "industrial democracy" through collective bargaining and other labor-management arrangements, it has achieved better education, more leisure, and broadening cultural opportunities for the masses of workers.

Even more significant, perhaps, has been the capacity of the American economy to remain essentially capitalist and yet transform itself politically and institutionally almost beyond recognition. Under the pressure of forces and tendencies generated from within, the American economy, while retaining and even reasserting the time-honored slogan of "free enterprise," has accepted a degree of public control, trade union participation, and social responsibility that must amaze any impartial observer. The process of transformation was spectacular under the New Deal, but it began before and has continued since. European labor men, coming here as part of ECA teams, have noted it with wonder and appreciation, and even a number of European Socialists have found themselves forced to compare it favorably with what often passes for socialism in their lands. How-

ever it may be evaluated, the reality of the change simply cannot be denied.

In relation to American Socialism, the significance of this change is double. In the first place, the actual development of capitalism in this country has sensationally belied the Marxist prognosis. In almost every respect, especially in matters affecting the life of the workers, the outcome has been utterly different from the Socialist expectation and warning. Practically all the evils that the Socialists said were inherent in capitalism and therefore could not be eliminated without a Socialist reconstruction of society—such things as low wages, long hours, economic insecurity, child labor, denial of educational opportunities—have, in fact, been eliminated or much mitigated by capitalism itself. Indeed, and this is the second point to be noted, virtually the entire traditional “minimum” program of the Socialist party—that is, virtually the entire program aside from the “ultimate” demand for the “social ownership and operation of the means of production”—has now become a reality. This “minimum” program, it will be recalled, included such demands as an 8-hour day, a minimum wage, unemployment and sickness insurance, old-age pensions, workmen’s compensation, the abolition of child labor, and graduated, direct taxation.

To be sure, the “ultimate” demand—nationalization of the means of production for which these other measures were to prepare the way—is still unrealized. But this “ultimate” demand is no longer put forward with much assurance, even in Socialist circles. The experience of Soviet Russia, and in part too of Nazi Germany, has forever shattered the dangerous illusion that the “abolition” of capitalism and its replacement by economic collectivism automatically leads to the salvation of society. “I have come to recognize,” Norman Thomas confesses, “that of itself, [social ownership] does not mechanically answer our economic problems, and that democratic controls will not come automatically but must be thought out.” The totalitarian potential in collectivism has not escaped even the most devout Socialist. In

democratic Socialist circles in this country, the very concept of Socialism has been undergoing far-reaching revision, which has brought it quite close to the notion of “mixed economy,” or the “middle way,” held by non-Socialists. Some Socialists might not concede this, but Norman Thomas himself recognizes that the lines are no longer clearly drawn. “The contrast between the existing capitalist hell and any probable Socialist heaven,” he admits, “is less absolute than it seemed in Gene Debs’ day.”

IF THE development of American capitalism has belied Socialist prophecy, the reality of the American party system has simply made mincemeat of Socialist politics. To the typical American Socialist, as to his European comrades, the two-party system was essentially a device for perpetuating capitalist rule. The “old” parties were merely “twin agencies of Wall Street,” with neither of which class-conscious labor could decently have any dealings. The AFL “non-partisan” policy was denounced as a fatal error since nothing but “betrayal” could be expected from “capitalist” parties. Conscientious Socialists, under the influence of European stereotypes, refused to give heed to realistic thinkers who pointed out how the American party system actually worked and in what ways it differed from European political structures.

But organized labor understood this well enough, in experience if not in theory. Its instinct proved correct: time demonstrated that the two parties were not solid phalanxes under the command of Wall Street but were in fact loose coalitions of regional, economic, and other special-interest blocs, held together by political patronage machines. The widest variety of interests were always represented and wielded influence in each, and by skillfully utilizing its voting strength, labor could make it worthwhile for the party bosses to sponsor its legislative demands. In such a set-up, “third” parties could have their use—to bring to the fore issues which the “old” parties were loath to face, and thus force them to take a

stand—but in the outcome, it was action by the major parties that counted. American labor, it turned out, understood all this: in other words, it understood the quite illogical flexibility and comprehensiveness of the American party system, with its wide opportunities for pressure politics. Labor understood it, but the Socialists did not.

The AFL's "non-partisan" pressure politics, so unlaborlike by Socialist standards, paid off rather modestly in the first part of the century, but with the New Deal it hit the jackpot. Here, too, despite the fear and confusion engendered by the 1929 crisis, despite huge unemployment, labor instinct proved thoroughly sound in its refusal to espouse revolutionary political solutions. Almost overnight, working through the Democratic party, organized labor became a major political force, a vital part of the New Deal political machine. Its legislative demands, and more, were taken over and quickly enacted into law. Reforms which labor had demanded for decades were now a reality—brought into being by a "capitalist" party, upon the demand and under the direction of a professional "old-party" politician. Is it any wonder that this incredible experience—something that according to Socialist theory simply could not have happened—left the party shattered and demoralized?

THE New Deal just about completed the destruction of the Socialist party. Decline, indeed, had begun to set in long before, as far back as the First World War. The high point in 1912 had hardly been reached when hostilities broke out in Europe, and in 1917, the United States entered the conflict. The impact of the war on the Socialist movement was deep and permanent, although it was not immediately obvious. For one thing, the radicalized Populist element, which had been such a source of strength for the party, melted away, its discontent partly allayed by war-time prosperity and its insurgency finding more congenial expression in the Non-Partisan League movement. The anti-war position adopted by the Socialist party at its

special convention in April 1917 won the acclaim of middle-class pacifists, but alienated large sections of organized labor.

Then came the Communist crisis. From 1919 to 1921, the party was torn apart by the fiercest internal struggle. Wholesale defections took place, and large sections of the membership, particularly foreign-born groups, went over to the Communists.

Barely a decade after the great victories and high hopes of 1912, the party found itself disorganized and confused. In 1912, Eugene Victor Debs, running for the presidency, received some 900,000 votes, or about 6 per cent of the total cast. Four years later, Allan Benson received less than 600,000. In 1920, Debs, making his campaign from a federal prison where he was serving a term for his anti-war activities, got 919,000 votes, but by this time the electorate had been doubled through the granting of women's suffrage, so that in fact Debs's percentage was only half of what it had been in 1912. In 1924, the Socialists supported La Follette's third-party candidacy, and in 1928, when Norman Thomas for the first time headed the Socialist ticket, his vote was only 267,000.

The decline in the Socialist vote was disastrous, but even more disastrous was the loss in membership. The high point, here too, was in 1912, when the party boasted 118,000 members in good standing. By 1920 the membership had fallen to 27,000 and by 1926 to 12,000, less than in 1903.

Communism remained a source of bedevilment through the ensuing years. From the middle 1920's on, the Socialists were caught between two millstones. They had to suffer, on the one hand, the attacks of conservatives and the suspicions of the unthinking over their presumed inherent kinship to Communism and, on the other hand, the abuse of "liberals" who were indignant at their skepticism over the "Soviet experiment" and their lukewarmness to the idea of violent revolution. But what took the heart out of Socialism in the 20's and early 30's was the success of Communism in convincing whatever left-thinking people there were

in America, especially the radical-minded youth, that it was the real inheritor of the militant traditions of "revolutionary" socialism, that it was indeed the only authentic socialism in the new era of "wars and revolutions." The standard "liberal" reading of history tended to make this claim plausible. German and Austrian Social Democracy had "betrayed" the revolution, while British Labor was hopelessly stodgy and bourgeois-minded, wedded to half-measures and ready to abandon even these under the least pressure. Noske and Scheidemann, the "hangmen of the German Revolution"; Ramsay MacDonald and J. H. Thomas, the "betrayers of the British workers": these were the stereotypes that dominated the liberal and radical mind of the 1920's. The American Socialist party, which before the First World War had worshiped at the shrine of German Social Democracy and afterwards looked to Britain for inspiration, was deeply involved in the disrepute into which these "compromising," "class-collaborationist" European movements had fallen.

The "Russian experiment," on the other hand, captivated the liberal and radical imagination. The Russian Bolsheviks were "putting socialism into action," while the Social Democrats and Laborites were "kowtowing to the bourgeoisie." The American Communists made effective use of their emotional stock in trade; they played up the dynamism and "socialist initiative" of Soviet Russia in a thousand variations and confidently proclaimed themselves the men of the future. The Socialist party they either contemptuously brushed aside as a futile and obsolete relic of the past, or denounced as a "counter-revolutionary instrument of imperialist reaction." Communism seized the initiative and, with some lapses, was able to retain it until almost the end of the 40's.

IF THE Socialist party lost its ideological dynamic to the Communists, it was robbed of its program by the New Deal. In 1932, on the eve of the New Deal, the party, though depleted in membership, was in a fairly militant mood. The internal dissension

which a few years later was to lead to a split between "right" and "left" wings was already beginning to be felt, but the entire organization united behind the candidacy of Norman Thomas. The country was in the depths of the great depression; unrest and discontent were rife, and everyone felt that this was at last the opportunity for the party to stage a comeback. In that year, Norman Thomas did indeed get 882,000 votes, but out of an electorate of 39,000,000 this amounted to about 2 per cent. The discontent and unrest had gone to elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt president.

At this point, the party was composed of a number of diverse elements with hardly any cohesion—stalwarts in the Socialist unions; fairly significant municipal organizations in Bridgeport, Milwaukee, and Reading; and a heterogeneous collection of middle-class liberals who looked to Norman Thomas for inspiration. The New Deal played havoc with all these groups. The spectacular speed and scope of the New Deal reforms, achieving almost overnight what labor and Socialism, each in its own way, had so long been striving for, effected a profound political reorientation on all sides. The Socialist unions, without even having to make much change in ideology, passed over into the New Deal camp and became an integral part of the "Roosevelt party." Scores of bright young Socialists trooped to Washington to man the new agencies that were springing up as part of the recovery program. Socialist organizations with sufficient strength to amount to something politically found it both expedient and rewarding to tie up with the Democratic forces in their states and localities. And the non-Communist liberals, while of course full of the highest regard for Norman Thomas and his ideals, found a natural place in the New Deal.

It would be wrong to consider these defections as desertions from the cause. They were merely an acknowledgment, under the impact of a tremendous political convulsion, of the great fact that the American party system was not like Europe's, that in America

it was possible to pursue Socialist goals, or at least such goals as the Socialist party had been advocating for decades, in and through the two-party system. And not merely to pursue them, but to achieve them too. At a great rally in New York, Abraham Cahan, veteran editor of the Socialist *Forward*, openly and enthusiastically hailed Franklin D. Roosevelt as a "Socialist." Despite the scandal this gave to more orthodox souls, Cahan was substantially right. Roosevelt was not a Socialist, of course, but he was doing the things the Socialists had dreamed and talked about doing for decades. Cahan and others could glory in the victory that history had so strangely and unexpectedly brought to the Socialist cause—but it was a victory that only speeded the dissolution of the Socialist party. "By his domestic policies, Roosevelt advanced his country toward a pragmatic Socialism," Norman Thomas soberly comments, "but he left a weakened Socialist organization in a powerful and bewildered country."

Yet paradoxically enough, American Communism was not weakened—if anything, it was rather strengthened—by the New Deal. This difference in effect emphasizes how utterly different the two movements had become in outlook, spirit, and practice. For the Socialist party, its distinct Socialist principles, with their ultimate aims and goals, were its point of honor and reason for existence. In reacting to the New Deal, therefore, Socialists had only two courses open to them: either to attack the New Deal in line with their principles and thus alienate all but the most orthodox; or else to admit their principles were irrelevant and work with the New Deal—and this usually meant dropping their party affiliation.

As against this, the Communists, whose only "principle" had long been the paramount obligation of unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union, could—and when ordered, did—take the new situation in their stride. For nearly two years after Roosevelt's election, it is true, they continued the ultra-revolutionary line initiated in 1928. But in 1935 came the famous "new turn." Operating under cover of the Popular Front,

designed of course as a device for promoting Soviet interests in the democratic world, the Communists now developed a double strategy. On the one hand, they dumped their formal program and hailed the New Deal as precisely the kind of thing they had been striving for all along; on the other, through their underground apparatus and connections, they assiduously infiltrated New Deal agencies with secret party members and fellow-travelers. To not a few "liberals" already pro-Soviet in sympathy the Communists succeeded in passing themselves off as respectable American "progressives." They were, in fact, able to make of the New Deal a front for their operations, to the acute discomfort of genuine New Dealers who saw what was happening but could not do anything about it. As long as Stalin's foreign policy required it, the Communists quite unembarrassedly continued to pass themselves off as the most zealous of New Dealers. Such "flexibility" was simply not available to the Socialists.

IT HAS been Norman Thomas's destiny to preside at the dissolution of his party. It is not the least of the paradoxes which mark the history of American Socialism that the leader of the party at the time of its decline and insignificance is the one Socialist figure in this country who has won a measure of regard and esteem that transcends political and class lines. Hillquit was an astute party leader and brilliant lawyer; but he was essentially a *Socialist* leader of Socialists. Debs was beloved by his followers to the point of idolatry; but his appeal, too, was limited: he was through and through *the proletarian*—to the point, indeed, where he could never understand, or establish any communication with, the very unproletarian-like American trade unionist. But Norman Thomas enjoys a status altogether different. His pronouncements are given ample and respectful coverage in the *New York Times*; he was recently installed as commentator on a large Western "capitalist" paper; and his name has been mentioned of late in the best circles as one whose appointment to a high diplomatic

post would bring great credit to his country. He is, indeed, one of our "elder statesmen," a kind of liberal-left Bernard Baruch.

A SOCIALIST'S FAITH, Norman Thomas's latest work, from which I have quoted several times in the above paragraphs, offers us a clue to this paradox and an insight into the strength and weakness of the kind of Socialism which Thomas represents and which he has, to a very considerable extent, impressed upon his party. The "faith" to which he stands witness is a faith in Socialism as the "policy of plenty, peace and freedom"; yet he himself acknowledges that "'right,' 'left,' 'capitalism,' and most of all 'socialism,' have become badly battered words far from self-defining; every day brings new evidence of the way in which our vocabulary tends to hinder our grasp of reality or logic." At the same time, he goes on talking about "capitalism" and "socialism" in the time-honored Socialist manner, with little regard for current institutional change or the newer economic thinking. He makes some eminently sane comments on the world situation as affected by the menace of Soviet aggression, and then trails off into some fantastic scheme of universal disarmament in a world that is, and for many years to come is obviously going to remain, an armed camp. Even Socialists, he says, "had to admit that it was no longer true that the difference between his [Truman's] 1948 program and the Republicans' was only a difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee," but he still goes on scolding the voters for their "obsession with the two-party system." He makes eloquent exhortations to preserve and extend our freedom, and yet seems very little disturbed by the totalitarian implications of an extensive collectivism. He recognizes that "if democratic Socialism is to prevail . . . it must unite the social actions of men of varying beliefs," but yearns for a new Socialist "synthesis" that will serve as the "universal ground" of thought and aspiration, in other words, for a new Socialist religion. At every point—and more instances could be cited—there is the same discrepancy: what one

hand gives in the way of social realism, the other takes away.

For Norman Thomas is essentially an idealist, in the literal sense of the term. He came to Socialism from the liberal ministry and social work, and for all the vast revolution in his views, the texture of his thought has not essentially changed. He is high-minded, well informed, and of sensitive social conscience. But he is thoroughly impatient with reality when it does not coincide with his principles and too easily tends to lose sight of this reality in the rational charm of his ideals. His anti-interventionism in the years preceding Pearl Harbor, which cost his party so dear, his equivocal position on the North Atlantic Treaty, his strange preoccupation with disarmament, the detached benevolence of his attitude to the labor movement, reflect a cast of mind that has a certain appeal to middle-class liberalism but stands in the way of any genuine contact with the realities of social life or with the real forces at work in contemporary society. His integrity, his high ideals, his obvious devotion to the common good, give him the public eminence he so well deserves, but they are not enough for political leadership.

To the American trade unionist, if he is known at all, he is known as a well-meaning but rather impractical "friend of labor," like some social-minded clergyman or philanthropist. He is not part of the labor movement, in the sense in which a Socialist leader must be if he is to fulfill his function, in the sense in which Hillquit or even Debs was. Even those who share his ideals cannot bring themselves to vote for him because somehow voting for him does not seem to have any relation to the realities of political life. He is at his best precisely when, like an "elder statesman," he speaks from beyond and above the political battle to recall his errant fellow countrymen to a sense of the eternal social verities. This is an exalted function, but it is not exactly the function of a party leader, not even the leader of a Socialist party. It is this short-range irrelevance and long-range utopian idealism which has reduced the American Socialist party to its

present insignificance. The party never really got off to a proper start, and it never could make contact with decisive sections of the American people, least of all with the labor movement. It refused to see America with American eyes and it therefore never, even in its heyday, enjoyed more than a peripheral existence. It had so little of a sound foundation that it could weather neither affliction nor success: the quasi-socialist New Deal proved as damaging to it in the 1930's as war and Communism had a decade and a half earlier. To the Socialists, the American labor movement always seemed deplorably crude and backward; yet on the crucial questions the labor movement, as we have seen, proved much more nearly right than the Socialists. In these matters, the criterion is ultimately pragmatic, and by this criterion American Socialism has been found wanting.

And yet, despite everything, American Socialism is not simply a failure. Its party organization is shattered, but the Socialist idea has survived and still retains surprising vitality. I do not refer to the blueprint for the "social ownership and operation of the means of production," itself no longer accepted unequivocally by any thinking Socialist. The Socialist idea, in a more basic sense, is something hard to define: it may be thought of as the conviction that the welfare of the masses of the people is a prime social responsibility and that in modern society this responsibility is not likely to be met unless the masses of the people—the wage-workers, the farmers, and other "functional" groups—themselves organize to act politically on behalf of their interests and the interests of the community at large. This conviction was in fact at the heart of the Socialist movement in America as elsewhere.

This idea has triumphed, as events show. The entire body of social and labor legislation, constituting the best part of what goes under the name of the New and Fair Deals, is a standing tribute to the Socialist idea and

to the leadership that over the years raised the banner and educated public opinion in support of this program. So, in a different way, are such organizations as Americans for Democratic Action, the Liberal party of New York, and the political agencies set up by the AFL and CIO. Norman Thomas is not claiming too much when he states: "If we Socialists have not accomplished what we hoped, we at least have contributed to the development of political consciousness in the ranks of labor." In this sense, the Socialist vision may be said to permeate advanced trade-union and liberal thinking and thus to exert a significant influence in national life.

YET that cannot be the whole story. It is not enough to record Socialism's positive achievement and ignore the fact that, with so much remaining to be done, not only is Socialism as an organized force broken and powerless, but it has left no successor. For all the advances America has made, the fundamental problems of a responsible society have *not* been fully solved by any means; indeed they can never be solved with any finality. American democracy, as the editors of *Fortune* have recently pointed out, is the nearest thing to a society in "permanent revolution" the world has ever seen; but to remain such, it must be kept dynamic. Every day brings its new tasks and responsibilities, its new conditions and directions. Old injustices and abuses take on new forms, and new ones emerge. To deal creatively with the problems continually thrown up by a dynamic society, the Socialist idea, or something akin to it, which can move and inspire many men to consider day-to-day problems under the influence of a larger vision, will always be needed. Looking about the current scene, it is hard to discern where the high purposes, challenging ideas, and crusading ardor that Socialism once contributed to American politics and social thinking are to come from.